



What We're Learning from New Beginnings Congregations

Church Extension's New Beginnings Assessment process is designed for congregations who have been in decline for nearly a generation—congregations of good-hearted, well-intentioned, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Most New Beginnings congregations are peopled by congregants who are mostly over 60—people who have given their lives to daily and weekly service of the church; people whose children grew up in the church; people who have been stewards of time, ideas, energy, and financial resources in ways that prioritized the mission of the church.

New Beginnings congregations are populated by folks asking questions like: Why do the younger folks in our families and neighborhoods value church so little? We have been so faithful to continue our studies and following of Jesus Christ. Why have we failed at reaching new generations? How do we form services of worship that fit with our familiar ways while also meeting the expectations of more diverse generations or populations? We find ourselves driving to a location that used to be five minutes from our homes. What does it mean that 90 percent of us are now driving further than 5 or 10 or 20 miles to get to Sunday worship? Do we really know the needs and desires and concerns of the neighborhood in which our church is located?

From Yearbook Report statistics from various denominations we know that about 2/3 of what were “mainline” congregations have been in decline, both in average worship attendance and income, for at least 10 years. New Beginnings congregations fall into this “2/3 group” almost exclusively.

Let's take a look at some of the data collected on the first 100 or so congregations engaged in New Beginnings work to see what patterns are emerging in congregations seeking transformation:

- Only 1 in 5 has mortgage debt, yet these congregations are spending more than 1/3 (on average) of their budgets on building maintenance and upkeep. 1 in 4 of these congregations is spending 40% or more on building expense.
- These congregations are spending on average 55% of their operating budgets on salaries—2 out of 5 are spending at least 60% on salaries. An average of 4.95% of operating expenses is used for program and 7.55% on mission.
- The average total assets of these congregations is \$2,892,097 and the average insured property value is \$2,590,458.
- Average square footage per congregation is 16,208. Average square footage need per congregation is 4,231. The average sanctuary in these congregations seats 248, while the average worship attendance is 54.
- So...per person average assets are around \$53,500 per person on a Sunday morning. These congregations have, on average, 300 square feet per person. During any given week, however, these congregations utilize less than 1/3 of their space on average for worship, program, and mission (understanding that utilization may mean only one or two hours a week in a sanctuary space).
- These congregations have averaged 2.6 baptisms and 5.1 transfers each year for the last 10-year period for a total of 7,538 additions.



- Ten years ago, the total participating membership in these congregations was 14,150. Today, it is 8,722, amounting to a 38% decline in participating membership inclusive of the additions.
- One half of these congregations spend 10% or less on mission and program combined.
- Only 1 in 5 spends 10% or more on mission, while 1 in 3 spends less than 5%.
- Only 1 in 10 of these congregations spends 10% or more on program, while more than half spend less than 5%.
- Eight of 9 of these congregations have racial/ethnic demographic disparities between their participating members and the Hispanic/Latino populations in their immediate neighborhoods (an average gap of 23%, but gaps as high as 88%).
- Two of 9 of these congregations have racial/ethnic demographic disparities between themselves and the Asian populations in their immediate neighborhoods.
- Almost all of these congregations have generational disparities between themselves and their immediate neighborhoods, meaning that the average age of New Beginnings congregants is much higher than the average age of people in the surrounding communities.

Chances are that your congregational assessment will reflect some of these trends. The picture of declining active participation and support for mission, along with the sheer disparity between congregational demographics and those of the community (whether rural, urban or suburban), can be quite alarming for those committed to being and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in their worlds. Some people will feel depressed because the picture painted by these numbers shows congregations who are spending much more time, energy and financial resources on keeping church doors open than on actual mission and witness. Some will feel anxious, believing that if they just worked harder at doing what used to work, church life will become vital. Some congregants may leave feeling the futility of shrinking ministry. Others may be immobilized by the grief of the probability of losing a church where family has made so many memories.

What is important to realize first is that your congregation is not alone. Most older “mainline” congregations have not known how to adapt their ways of living out mission to the changing world in which we live. Secondly, and of equal importance, it is imperative that people understand that the congregation’s failure to adapt to changing times is not “my” or “our” fault. Casting blame and arguing that there are simple turnaround solutions for congregations in decline usually only leads to the kind of conflict which can end congregational life very quickly.

New Beginnings offers the opportunity to move beyond the collective emotions of a congregation in decline to make a RADICAL and FAITHFUL step into the future of unknown possibilities. These steps are radical because they mean an ending to what was. In any redevelopment option (relocation, starting a parallel congregation in the same building, restarting a congregation with a different pastor and congregational base, morphing a congregation from one demographic profile to another), and in most redefinition options (closing to leave assets to other ministries or redefining the heart and soul of a particular ministry), the old has to pass away in order for the new to come. The congregation’s first step really is a willingness to lose life as it has been in order to gain life anew. The step is a proclamation of faithfulness that God has a new holy ministry for people and resources to engage into the future.